



Pruning Tools

by Cass Turnbull

“Man, the tool user” is a phrase that has stuck with me since Jr. High School. I usually quote this phrase when I'm trying to convince my husband to use something other than his hands as a sledgehammer. It's certainly true that whenever you become engrossed in a project you are apt to resist taking the time to go search out the necessary tool. But it is an important lesson. It saves work in the not-too-long run. And saving work is intrinsically enjoyable. Furthermore, getting the right tool will save wear and tear on your most important tool—your hands.



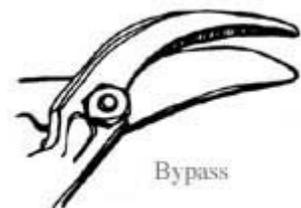
HAND PRUNER

Occasionally, when I'm out on a garden consultation or class demonstration, I borrow the homeowner's hand pruner (AKA hand-shear or, if you are British or just well read—secateurs) to demonstrate a cut. Those cheap tools cut so poorly that I am tempted to give them the heave-ho into the bushes, right then and there. It's no wonder that people give up trying to learn how to prune.

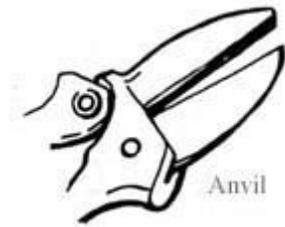
I remember my first pair of professional quality hand pruners. The new gardener at the Seattle Parks Department in charge of our sub-district ordered them for me. It was a red handled Felco #2. It lay heavy in the hand, and was, oh-so sharp to the touch. It came with a leather holster. Getting your first good hand pruner inspires much the same exultation you felt as a kid at Christmas. Felcos are definitely the Red Rider BB gun of the gardener's world.

Felco is the brand name of the most popular hand pruner. If you are a PlantAmnesty member at the \$50 level you are a Felco-teer. From time to time I try one of the many imitations. They look just the same, but never seem to cut as well. I figure it must be the quality of the metal in the blade. I always go back. There are many other Felco models that are equally as good. You may find that you prefer a #6 or a #8. Some people like ones with smaller, straight blades—good for propagation work. Some prefer the pruners with a smaller grip because they are less damaging to their hands. This is no small matter for people in the business. Carpal tunnel syndrome, sometimes requiring surgery, is quite common. For the same reason, Felco markets some models with a swivel handle. I never liked the looks of a moving handle. It just seems like one more thing to break and I suspect it would get gunked up with dirt and pitch. But other gardeners of my acquaintance have assured me that they are sturdy and of value.

The topic of garden tools is very subjective, and what works for one person may not work for another. I wouldn't want to get in an argument about which one was the best. But I can tell the following: Most professional pruners I know use “bypass” type of shears (works



like scissors) rather than the "anvil" type. You get a cleaner cut. Originally, I preferred the anvil types because they had more "umpf". But I now think of them as unprofessional and was slightly disappointed to see that Felco was even offering an "anvil" type pruner.



Anvil pruners always leave a tiny stub and they purportedly crush, rather than cut, the stem. As you gain experience in the field, you become more sensitive to the need for clean cuts. Like a chef or a surgeon, you fixate on getting ever sharper and more precise tools. Rather than searching for a small tool that can do a big job, you get a complete set of tools and keep them handy. Each one is specifically matched to a certain kind and sized job. You may recall that Mr. Natural says, "Use the right tool for the job." When I worked for the Seattle Parks Department we also used the phrase, "get a bigger hammer". The two pound hammer is still one of my favorite tools.

All parts of the Felco are replaceable, like the spring, the blade, etc. I rarely bother with parts though. I can use the original pair for years, until the plastic coating wears off the handles. They hold up really well. And, I am ashamed to admit, I don't take very good care of them. I do give the blade a few licks with a file when I notice my pruning cuts are starting to tear. Other people, people of greater tool care virtue than me, have more extensive regimes for sharpening and caring for their pruning tools. Mine is pretty simple. After a rainy day of pruning and weeding I refrain from leaving them stored in the holster, or they get very rusty. I take them inside and wash them off, scrubbing them in the sink. Then I spray with WD 40 and store open until dry.

In fact, when they are not inside my holster, my pruners are always open. This is because Felcos have a flaw. That little latch (supposed to keep the blades shut when not in use) loosens-up and starts closing the pruners in between each and every cut. Very annoying! And there's no use trying to tighten it back up. I always just take the whole mechanism off and throw it away. The holster keeps the pruners shut when they're not in use, so I don't really need the latch anyway. And the spring-loaded tension of the open blades against the holster sides may even help the pruners stay inside (say, for example, when I'm pruning upside-down). I think that Felco may have tried to fix the latch once, but it still fell open. Instead of fixing the problem, they just succeeded in making it so I couldn't unscrew the latch and get it off. Then I had to use a little piece of duct tape to keep it stuck open. It looked really professional, as you can imagine.

HOLSTER

Having a holster is essential. It keeps you from losing your very expensive pruners in a debris pile inside a shrub. For the same reason the shear handles are red. They make different kinds of holsters: one is sort of cone-shaped, another is more of a U-shaped to fit the different models of pruners. There is also one with a clip to attach to your pocket (good for women with hips) and the kind with slots that you thread your belt through. Having a holster means that you are always ready to act with quick draw pruning whenever a stub is sighted. It's like having a pair of scissors with you at all times. I use my pruners to stab open bags of soil, cut string trimmer twine, clean around sprinkler heads, (more apologies to the people who take good care of their tools). And there is even a wire-cutting notch on the lower blade that you can use to cut free the odd, strangled tree you might run across.

And besides, having a leather holster makes you feel like a real cowgirl at the end of the day when you hang up it up (John and I have His and Hers pegs for our belts). And when you walk into a store or bank with it on, people immediately suspect that you are a person

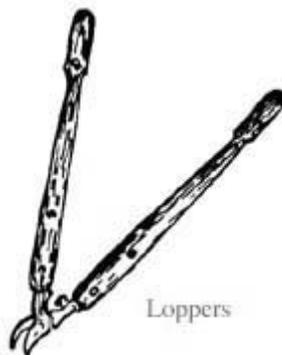
of some authority, like an electrician or a robber. And, if perchance you find yourself waiting in a long line, you might even sidle up to the potted Ficus to do a little absent minded deadwooding. I am so attached to my belt, holster and pruners that I have been known to pack them up to take on vacation. Arborists don't have a separate holster for their hand pruners. I believe it's built into their saw scabbard.

RESOURCES

There are many other brands of pruners. In all fairness, I should mention that other very good professionals swear by Corona and Sanvik. You might care to try them and let me know what you think. In general it's hard to find one really good source for all the tools a gardener needs and there is a lot of junk sold in the hardware stores. The better local nurseries usually carry a nice selection of good tools. A large equipment store, Steubers, in Monroe has most landscaping tools and supplies (call 360-568-2626), as does Northwest Landscape Supply (phone 1-800-303-9325) in Marysville.

Nationally, you can receive The A.M. Leonards Inc. wholesale catalogue that has just about every landscaping tool on the market. (Call 1-800-543-8955 to request one).

I was impressed with the ratchet-type hand pruners at first, because of the large cut they could effortlessly make. But eventually the blades splay apart, and I'm back to using my Felcos once again.



LOPPERS

I swear, the second most mis-pronounced word in gardening is loppers (Cotoneaster is the first). People tend to rhyme it with dopers. Actually it rhymes with toppers. I prefer the Corona brand. And as with all pruning tools, it pays to buy the more expensive ones. I like the wood-handled loppers because they are not as cold in your hands in the winter as the metal-handled ones. Also, they tend to break, not bend, when pushed too far. It is much easier to discard, or repair a broken-handled lopper. A bent-handled one tends to stay on the truck to annoy its users indefinitely.

I know just how far I can push my wood-handled loppers and I haven't broken a pair in years (and years).

When cutting up brush, I do sometimes brace one handle with my foot on the ground (hook side on the bottom, slip in the branch and then push down, slowly, with both hands on the upper handle. The power of leverage is evident. And it always helps to make the cut at a slant (as anybody who cuts bamboo poles can tell you). At risk of further contradiction of the "get a bigger hammer" adage, I sometimes brace one handle against my breast bone and pull toward me with both hands to cut a larger branch which is still on a plant. It makes for some interesting bruises.

Be prepared to shell out a little extra money for the lopper with a rubber-lopper bumper at the hinge. (Go ahead, say rubber lopper bumpers five times, fast.) This cushions the blow to your hands when making repeated cuts. When I have not pruned for a week or two, and then return to the job, my hands always hurt the next day. Hand pruning a Laurel hedge can ruin me for a week. Thank heaven I rarely do this. Like most gardeners, I got out of doing hedges as soon as I could. The last time I arborized and pruned fifty feet of Laurel, I borrowed my husband's compound loppers. They really paid off. But in general, I avoid using heavy and/or complex tools, preferring instead to get the next sized "right" tool. When pruning, this means you trade the loppers in for a saw.

Pruning loppers, or lopping shears, are used for cuts from about 1/3" to about 1" depending on the hardness of the wood, of course. The long handles are also good for extending your reach above your head or to reach inside a thorny shrub. And they are used to further reduce the size of pruned branches in order to fit them compactly onto the truck.

PRUNING SAW

The invention of the ARS blade and pruning saw practically put my loppers out of business. This revolutionary blade, (Also called Japanese style, or tri-faceted) cuts easily twice as fast as a similarly sized regular pruning saw. All the gardeners I know now carry a red plastic-handled, folding Felco 60 in their back pockets. For all the promotion I do for Felco, you think they'd sponsor PlantAmnesty. Actually they don't even advertise. They don't have to. I used to have an old wood handled Corona folding saw, and it sufficed for years. But when I got my first ARS-type saw I found that it cut so fast that I rarely turned to my loppers. I would be clear across the yard before I noticed that I didn't have them with me. I made it home one day without them. And when I discovered that I lost my loppers, I felt a twinge of pain just because we'd been together for so long. It's not good to get emotionally attached to your tools, I guess.

In the beginning, I liked the bow saw. Once again, because it seemed to have more power. But they're really no good for pruning. Bow saws are designed for cutting firewood. Pruning saws are crescent shaped with a narrow, pointed end so that they can fit into tight spaces. The bow of a bow saw often prevents you from making the proper-angled cut on a tree. You wind up cutting off the branch collar. Very bad.

The idea behind the Felco 60 blade folding into the handle is, I assume, to protect your truck upholstery and yourself from inadvertent cuts. Once, when I was pruning inside an eight foot shrub, I tossed a cut branch out to the lawn by throwing it up and out. Unfortunately, I still held my pruning saw open in the other hand and managed to make a significant pruning cut on my forearm. Just before the blood started to gush and the shock set in, I remember noting with some interest that it looked like an anatomical illustration showing the layers of skin.

Danger is everywhere, don't you know! A good way to cut off your finger is to reach to the backside of the shrub in front of you with your hand pruners and prune it "backwards". The ARS type pruning saws are frequently seen with the tips broken off. They snap off when new users try to force the blade through a branch. I know someone who suffered an eye injury as a result. As with all pruning saws, the ARS ones cut on the pull stroke, which may account for some of the problem. I think the ARS types have more slender blades than the old ones did, too. But really it's mostly a matter of learning how to finesse the cut. And only experience can teach you that. The saws with the broken tips still cut well, and you can always relegate it for use as a root pruner, or "the dirt saw" as my husband calls it.

Although I never think twice about using my loppers to cut roots, and I use my hand pruners to prune roots even though I know I shouldn't, I never let my good hand saws touch the dirt. The ARS-type blades cannot be sharpened, or at least not easily. The replacement blades are sold separately and are quick to install. Still I guard the blade like a mother hen.

When preparing yourself to do a pruning job, suit up with all your tools. The Felco is in the holster, the loppers are slung over the shoulder and the pruning saw is tucked in the back pocket. If it is raining out, the saw may be tucked into the rubber boot, since the rain

gear has made the back pocket inaccessible. Then as the size of the cut exceeds the limits of the tool, you can readily trade up.

I have taken to keeping an arborist's saw in a scabbard hanging from my tool belt. It looks pretty pretentious, I must admit, but comes in real handy for the larger cuts, if there aren't too many. Unlike the chain saw, it always starts on the first pull. You don't need to spend fifteen minutes filling it up with fuel and bar oil, or straightening out the new chain and putting it on. And it doesn't annoy the neighbors. The arborists' saw I use has the same tri-faceted blade as my little saw. It's called the TURBO CUT. I guess that's sort of an arborist's joke. Which reminds me, "How do you get a one-armed arborist out of a tree?" ANSWER: Wave.

If you have a favorite gardening tool that you'd like to tell us about please write.